

June 20, 2019

Representative Alan Lowenthal, Chairman
Representative Paul Gosar, Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Energy and Minerals
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Lowenthal and Gosar,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on House Bill 3225, Restoring Community Input and Public Protections in Oil and Gas Leasing Act of 2019. The West Elks Winery Association offers our strong support for the Act.

The 12 wineries of the West Elks American Viticultural Area, America's highest elevation AVA, depend directly upon adjacent public lands for irrigation water and process water. Further, we depend upon the multiple recreational opportunities these lands offer to help us attract visitors to our tasting rooms and we depend upon the pastoral, bucolic character of our valley and its surroundings to enhance our offerings to our guests. It is unsurprising then that our local public lands are heavily used for disparate purposes encompassing watershed, irrigation water collection, storage and transfer, ground water recharge, hunting, fishing, timber harvest, firewood harvest, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, hiking, grazing, foraging, canoeing, ATVing, wildlife watching, horseback riding, etc. The introduction of a new and heavily disruptive use, such as oil and gas exploration and development, might well be expected to impact many if not all of these uses.

The impact of oil and gas exploration and development on this complex web of existing uses is difficult to capture and understand. The process of achieving that understanding cannot be shortchanged without risk of severe damage to what has been a historical activity. Allowing stakeholders the time and opportunity to provide comments and input is critical to developing this understanding. It is easy lose sight of the fact that the process, under the best of circumstances, is heavily weighted in favor of the oil and gas interests. Everyone on their side of the table is paid handsomely to occupy their chairs while everyone across the table must find time after a 12 hr workday and before evening chores to occupy theirs. Restoration of the time and opportunity for the public to provide input to the oil and gas leasing process is critical and underlies our support for House Bill 3225.

Specifically, the wineries of the West Elks Winery Association support an increase in the time allotted for public input. We support shorter lease terms, thus helping to ensure that best and most current information is being used to manage the lands we depend upon. Further, we support provisions that require that other, existing uses be given proper consideration. Not every impact is simply a question of proper mitigation. Some impacts cannot be fixed. It is possible that, in some cases, what lies on the ground is more valuable than what lies under it.

The members of the West Elks Winery Association depend directly on the public lands surrounding us. We require, appreciate and expect the opportunity to fully participate in the management of those lands. The provisions being considered in H.R. 3225 would help ensure that organizations such as the West Elks Winery Association are able to better meet the needs of our members. We urge you to continue your work in this important legislation and to support its passage.

Sincerely,

Brent Helleckson for
The West Elks Winery Association
41720 Reds Road
Paonia, CO 81428
970-527-3444
brent@stonecottagecellars.com

